

Learners' reactions to a classroom activity

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that cause different reactions to the same classroom activity.

The focus of language teaching has changed from a teacher-centered one to a learner-centered one (Nunan, 1988). "Learner-centeredness" has been a consistent feature in language teaching since the 1960s. It is said that this movement grew out of dissatisfaction with 'traditional' language teaching practice, that a learner-centered style of teaching allows learners to play a more active and participatory role in their language study, and that involvement of learners in their language study may be realized in day-to-day teaching practice.

In the area of language learning research, beliefs are recognized as the learners' opinions or philosophies about language learning. Learners hold a wide variety of beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 1987). Learners' beliefs can influence their motivation to learn and their expectations about language learning (Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 52). Mori (1999, for example) claims that the nature of learners' learning experience could affect ways in which their beliefs are formed. Therefore it is obvious that learners' previous experiences are significant factors in their learning attitudes in future.

What motivated this study was learners' different reactions to the same classroom activity. The research question of the study is: what is the cause of learners' reactions to a classroom activity? It is thus intended to investigate learners' learning experience as a possible source of their beliefs in language learning.

2. Method

2.1 The classroom activity

In this study, the same classroom activity was carried out in the reading class both in high school and college. Since the literature in the area of learner-centered teaching suggests that the transfer of responsibility for the management of learning from teacher to learner is of great significance (Tudor, 1996, for example), the project work was attempted as a learner-centered activity. The traditional

reading class tends to be monotonous: the teacher usually explains English sentences and translates them into Japanese. In an attempt to minimize this problem, a learner participatory activity was carried out.

In this activity, students first form themselves in groups of three or four, and one paragraph is assigned to them before attending the class. They study it and prepare for a presentation. The presentation is mainly on the structure and meaning of sentences. The rest of the students listen to peers' presentation and make a comment or ask a question if they had different interpretation from the presenters'. The teacher corrects mistakes in their presentations if any. And in the end, the teacher explains the whole paragraph. The focus of the teacher's explanation is on the sentence structure, especially the location of the subject and the predicate or verb.

The method is based on the following considerations. First, the college students in this study seem to be poor at English grammar. They need to know a minimum of grammar to avoid memorizing Japanese translation without understanding the content, just as they did in high school for examinations. Although English grammar is essential for them, it is also important to grasp the meaning of the context. Students were to exchange their opinions about what was written in the textbook. They also had to imagine what was written in abstract expression and guess the concrete situation which was really meant. Second, although this activity takes time compared with traditional lessons of teacher's explanation, it is instructive for students because they must study at home for their presentation. Making a presentation in the class is rare experience in Japanese school, and students who listen to their peers' presentation also can learn by new experience.

2. 2 Subjects

There are two groups of subjects.

One group consists of 58 college students, 57 male and 1 female. Most of them are from technical high school, where less time is devoted to English lessons than in academic high school. Some of them wrote in a questionnaire that memorizing a Japanese translation of English textbook was enough for the examination in high school. They also expressed their resolutions to study English earnestly in college. Their English proficiency is lower-intermediate.

The other group consists of 34 third-year high school students, all female. This high school has a long tradition of high academic standards and covers the last three years of a 6-year curriculum that starts from the affiliated junior high school. Students have to take an entrance examination before entering junior high school. In order to pass the examination, they had to attend a cram school at night from around age 9. Their English proficiency is intermediate. Table 1 shows what students in the class of 2002 did after leaving the high school: more than 95% of them either went to university or started to prepare

for doing so (from the material published by the high school for private circulation among teachers, students, and parents). This keen interest in higher education accounts for the fact that most of the students attend a cram school at night.

Table 1. What students are doing after graduation (May, 2002)

	Number	%
University	220	82.7%
Junior College	5	1.9%
Technical College	3	1.1%
Employed	1	0.4%
Studying abroad	3	1.1%
Preparing for admission to university next year	34	12.8%
Sum	266	100%

2. 3 Materials

The data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire which asked students about their impression and opinions on the classroom activity. Whether they considered themselves an extrovert or an introvert was also asked, because it was hypothesized that introvert students might hate making a presentation in public. I follow the definitions of the terms 'extrovert' and 'introvert' in Skehan (1989).

2. 4 Data collection and analysis

Their descriptions were sorted out by reason. As for college students, 74% approved and 17% disapproved the activity (Table 2). Among the reasons for approval, "Easy to acquire the English ability" is the largest in number. Probably they felt they could learn English through preparation for making a presentation. Reasons such as "Become autonomous" or "Motivated" suggest that they could be autonomous learners in the future. Some of their descriptions are as follows: I have formed the habit of studying English by myself; I studied English harder than before, because I got interested in English; I enjoyed lessons and I was motivated, so I no longer felt apprehensive about studying English.

As for high school students, their reactions were completely opposite (Table 3). Only 9% approved and 88% disapproved the activity. Among the reasons of disapproval, "Prefer teacher-centered lessons" is the largest in number. Answers given by the second largest number of students are "Time consuming" and "Only presenters take lessons". Some of their descriptions are as follows: This activity took much time to prepare, while I had to do my homework from cram school; I can't rely on peers' explanation; I wanted a Japanese translation of the text; I want the teacher to explain the whole textbook.

Table 2. An impression on the classroom activity (College Students)

	Number	Reasons	Number
Approval (extrovert: 15, introvert: 28)	43 (74%)	Become autonomous	4
		Easy to acquire the English ability	17
		Feeling of participation	5
		I benefited from the preparation for lessons	5
		New style of lessons	7
		Interesting	2
		Motivated	2
		I felt good about studying advanced lessons	1
Neither	3 (5%)		
No entry	2 (3%)		
Disapproval (extrovert: 4, introvert: 6)	10 (17%)	Hate to speak in public	1
		Time consuming	2
		Poor at presentation	1
		Exhausting	1
		Peers' presentations were not as good as the teacher's	4
		Others	1

N = 58

Table 3. An impression on the classroom activity (High school Students)

	Number	Reasons	Number
Approval (extrovert: 2, introvert: 1)	3 (9%)	Easy to acquire the English ability	2
		Feeling of participation	1
Neither	1		
Disapproval (extrovert: 14, introvert: 16)	30 (88%)	Exhausted in preparation	2
		Time consuming	4
		Hate to speak in public	1
		Difficult to make a presentation	3
		Prefer teacher-centered lessons	12
		Only presenters take lessons	4
		Others	4

N = 34

These descriptions may indicate that their learning experiences affect their beliefs about learning. Students who approve the classroom activity do so because they can recall specific experiences which are associated with positive aspects of the activity; on the other hand, students who disapprove it do so because they remember either negative aspects of the method on which the activity focuses or positive aspects of other methods.

The numbers of extrovert and introvert students are indicated in the column of approval and disapproval in Table. 2 and Table. 3. In the case of Table. 2, among approval students introvert students are much more than extrovert students (extrovert: 15, introvert: 28). In the rest of the column, the numbers of extrovert and introvert students are almost the same, although it was hypothesized that introvert students might hate the activity including a presentation. In fact, one introvert student wrote in a questionnaire as follows: At the beginning I did not want to make a presentation, but gradually I came to think it was worth doing. This is an example even an introvert student could get used to it and appreciate it. In this way extroversion and introversion hypothesis was exploded. It is considered that these factors have little reference to learners' preference for the classroom activity.

2. 5 Discussion

Considering the reasons for approval, disapproval and analyzing their descriptions, it is conceivable that there are two causes for the opposite reactions.

The first one might be entrance examinations to university. High school students have to study hard for entrance examinations, and they are unable to direct their attention to other matters. Their chief concern at present is probably entering a university.

The second one might be their learning experiences, which could affect the formation of their beliefs. It is said that learners' beliefs can influence their motivation and attitude to learn (Wenden, 1987). High school students probably attended a cram school from an early age, and they have attended a cram school for several years again to prepare for entrance examinations to university. They are used to taking highly efficient crammed instruction for such a long time. Their beliefs about learning might be "achieving a maximum of efficiency with a minimum of effort is the best way to study". Accordingly their demand is teacher's explanation of important points for exam questions. The probable cause of their situation is an entrance examination system in Japan.

On the other hand, most of the college students entered this college without an entrance examination, but with a recommendation entering system. As they did not have an experience of crammed instruction, they might have a flexible way of thinking. That could be the reason why they did not lose curiosity to study in the various ways.

3. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This study suggests a possibility that learners' beliefs had an influence on their learning behavior towards a classroom activity. The other factor besides beliefs which influenced their behavior could be their purpose.

This study seemed to identify these two factors, that is, entrance examinations to university as their purpose and different experiences in language learning as a cause of formation of their beliefs. As their purpose, in order to pass entrance examinations to university, high school students wanted a quick answer to the problem. It is worrying that such an attitude might hinder their autonomous learning. As their cause, high school students have had an intensive but unnatural instruction for a long time. It seemed that both their purpose and cause stemmed from the same origin, that is, an entrance examination system in Japan. Most Japanese students study hard before entering university, but not so hard at the university. If Japanese entrance examination system had a bad influence on students' learning attitude in the long run, a reform will be needed for appropriate learning attitude of students.

It is concluded that these two factors mainly caused different reactions to the same classroom activity. Although students' reaction to the activity in college was favorable, it turned out to be unfavorable in the case of high school students. We should keep in mind that a certain classroom activity favored by one group is not always favored by the other group, because of the different needs and beliefs of learners.

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